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## Do Situational Variables Affect Adherence to

## Formal Organizational Policies?

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## Abstract

A number of researchers have examined how individual differences and situational variables contribute to counterproductive behaviors (Blasi, 1980; Malinkowski & Smith, 1985; Sackett, Burris, & Callahan, 1989), but little is known about the variables related to the reporting of these behaviors. This study used the scenario-based approach described by Motowidlo, Dunnette, and Carter (1990) to determine whether situational variables affect subjects' intended reporting of various organizational policy infractions. Approximately 400 cadets from the United States Air Force Academy completed an instrument made up of 12 scenarios which systematically varied (a) the emotional closeness of the infraction, (b) the severity of the infraction, and (c) the presence or absence of other witnesses to the infraction. The results indicated that all three situational factors played important roles in determining reporting intentions.

Given the number of journal articles and books devoted to the subject, the study of organizational ethics has been a topic of increasing importance over the past decade. Some of this research has been concerned with the relationships among situational and individual difference variables and unethical employee behavior. One important finding in this regard has been that formal ethics policies tend to reduce the incidence of unethical behaviors (Hegarty & Sims, 1979; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). Although many colleges and universities maintain formal ethics policies addressing cheating, a substantial percentage of students anonymously admit to cheating on a regular basis (Gordon, 1990). Gordon (1990) maintained that the pursuit of grades and fraternity/sorority loyalties are often cited reasons for cheating, however, weak enforcement of ethics policies may also play a crucial role. Although the situational, individual difference, and demographic factors related to the manifestation of unethical behaviors has been investigated, little is known about those factors related to the toleration or reporting of these acts. As such, this study is different from most studies of ethical behavior, as it explores the situational variables related to the reporting of organizational policy infractions rather than the overt performance of these behaviors.

## Method

Setting

The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) is a four-year undergraduate military institution whose mission is to "provide instruction and experience to all cadets so that they graduate with the knowledge, character, and motivation essential to leadership as career officers in the United States Air Force" (Kochanski, 1990, p. 132). In addition to academic and athletic training, cadets receive extensive training and indoctrination in the organizational policies governing cadet behavior throughout their four-year tenure. Several aspects of these policies governing cadet behavior make USAFA unique among colleges and universities. First, any cadet witnessing a policy infraction by another cadet must either report the incident or confront the violator and give him or her the opportunity to self report. Cadets who fail to report another cadet's transgression are guilty of toleration, which itself is an organizational policy infraction. Second, the cadets themselves are responsible for the enforcement and administration of the

policies governing cadet behavior. Cadets investigate, judge, and have a role in determining the punishment for all cadets found in violation of organizational policies.

### Measure

This study used written scenarios to assess intent to report various organization policy violations. Three situational variables were varied across the scenarios, which were (a) the seriousness of the infraction ("severity"), (b) the emotional closeness between the transgressor and the observer/reporter ("closeness"), and (c) the presence or absence of other witnesses ("turn-in"). Because of the policies governing cadet behavior, the presence of others should increase the likelihood that the observer would be reported for tolerating the transgression if he or she did not report the incident. Through the use of scaling exercises, several exemplars were chosen which represented three levels of severity, two levels of emotional closeness, and two levels of turn-in. These exemplars were systematically matched to create a completely crossed set of 12 scenarios.

Although the development of the scenarios played a crucial role in this study, the development of a response scale that would be appropriate for all of the scenarios was also important. The first step in the response scale development was the generation of nine statements which spanned the range of possible responses to organizational policy infractions. Eighty cadet participants rated each statement on the relative strength of the response by writing the letter corresponding to each statement on a visual scale from 1 to 25, where higher numbers indicated greater strength of response (i.e., greater intent to report the violator for the infraction). The results of this initial scaling were then used to select five statements which both spanned the response strength continuum and had relatively high levels of agreement (i.e., low standard deviations).

In addition to the scenarios and response scale, several demographic items were included in the final version of the questionnaire. These demographic items assessed cadets' Grade Point Average (GPA), Military Performance Average or MPA (a composite of military ratings from peers, cadet and officer supervisors, academic instructors, and athletic coaches), policy violation history, completion of a philosophy course on ethics, participation in intercollegiate athletic teams or clubs, reported religiosity, class year, and participation in specialized ethics code training.

### Administration and Sample

Two versions of the questionnaire were produced by randomly varying the order of the scenarios. Cadets were asked to indicate their responses to all questions and scenarios on an optically scannable form. This questionnaire was administered to four cadet squadrons of approximately 110 cadets each over a three day period in October 1990. Two of the squadrons were chosen because their freshmen had participated in a specialized ethics code training program. The other two squadrons were chosen for convenience; however, because cadets are assigned randomly to squadrons, the overall sample of cadets was believed to be representative of the cadet population.

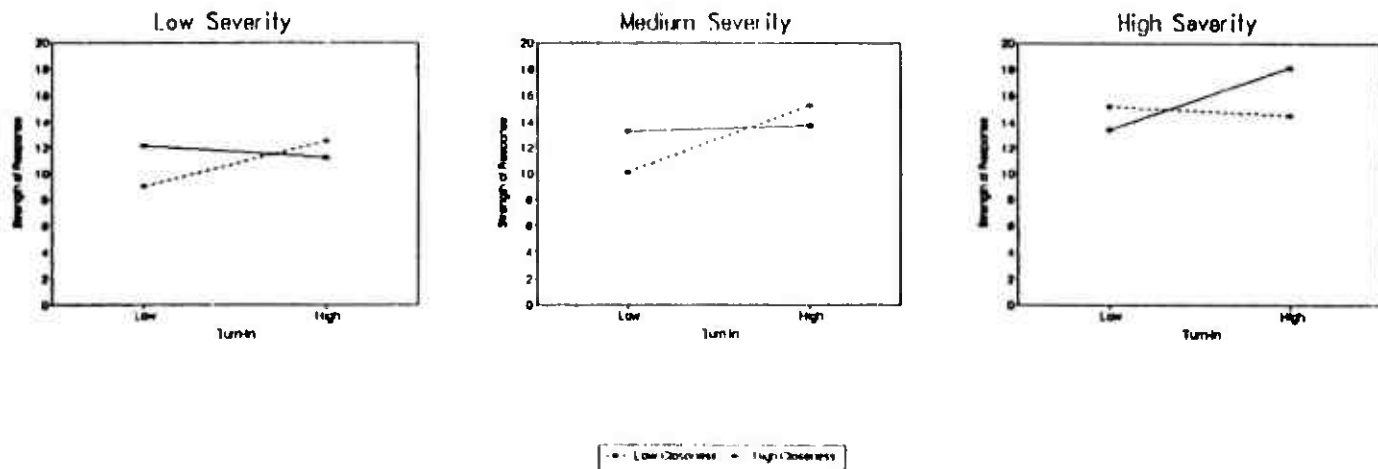
### Results

As described in the previous section, this study was planned as a  $3 \times 2 \times 2$  repeated measures design, with 3 levels of severity of offenses, 2 levels of emotional closeness, and 2 levels of turn-in. To analyze the data for the effects of these situational factors, we used the repeated measures option in the SPSS-X MANOVA program (SPSS, Inc., 1988). All three main effects were significant in the predicted direction (severity:  $F(2, 728) = 148.72, p < .000$ ), closeness:  $F(1, 364) = 36.76, p < .000$ , and turn-in:  $F(1, 364) = 186.23, p < .000$ ). Cadets were more likely to report relatively severe offenses and were also more tolerant of offenses committed by close friends than those committed by relative strangers. Offenses that were witnessed by other cadets were also more likely to be reported than those witnessed only by the respondent.

Several interactions were also significant. In terms of the two-way interactions, cadets had significantly stronger reporting intentions when the offenses were relatively severe and others had witnessed the event; much lower reporting intentions were noted for the low severity, low turn-in condition ( $F(2, 728) = 7.90, p < .000$ ). The closeness  $\times$  turn-in interaction term was also significant ( $F(1, 364) = 15.95, p < .000$ ). Cadets reported stronger reporting intentions when a violation was committed by a relative

stranger and others had also witnessed the offense; lower reporting intentions were noted for the high closeness, low turn-in condition. Finally, all three within-subjects factors acted jointly to influence cadets' reporting intentions ( $F(2, 728) = 98.75, p < .000$ ). The weakest intended action was in response to a low severity violation in which the observer and violator were emotionally close and there were no other witnesses to the policy infraction. Conversely, the strongest intended response was associated with a high severity violation in which the observer and violator were not emotionally close and others had also observed the policy infraction (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mean Severity of Response Ratings by the Three Situational Factors



To assess the effects of the demographic variables, a series of 1 between-, 3 within-subjects analyses were conducted. The strongest between-subjects effect was noted for class year ( $F(1, 361) = 11.30, p < .001$ ). Interestingly, this relationship was a curvilinear one; the mean responses for freshmen and seniors were higher than those for sophomores and juniors. A significant between-subjects effect for cadet squadron was also found ( $F(3, 361) = 3.31, p < .02$ ), which implies that the social context in which cadets are immersed after entering the Cadet Wing influenced reporting intentions. There also appeared to be a linear effect for religiosity ( $F(4, 360) = 2.56, p < .039$ ). Cadets reporting greater religiosity also reported they intended to take stronger actions across the scenarios. Finally, the reported MPA of cadets also was associated with differences in the mean intended action scores. This effect was also curvilinear; cadets with very low or very high MPAs reported stronger intended actions than did cadets with moderate MPAs.

### Discussion

Intent to tolerate organizational policy or code violations, like most social acts, appears to be a complex process which is influenced by many factors. The current study indicates that both situational and demographic factors influence intent to report such infractions. Situational factors, such as emotional closeness to the violator, severity of the offense, and the likelihood of being turned in for failure to report, influenced reporting intentions both independently and interactively. Several demographic variables also affected reporting intention ratings.

Several comments about the feasibility of using low fidelity simulations to assess adherence to an organization's formal ethics policy seem warranted. First, we believe this study demonstrates the feasibility of using scenarios to assess the situational factors associated with adherence to a organizational policies. This methodology makes it possible to systematically vary the situational factors related to whistleblowing while minimizing the repetitiveness of the instrument. This was achieved by constructing scenarios which included people or violations considered to be psychologically equivalent by observers.

Second, we think this methodology could be expanded to examine the situational factors which influence a leader's behavioral intentions. For example, scenarios might incorporate individuals and performance

levels considered psychologically equivalent to systematically examine some of the tenets of attribution theory regarding interpersonal relationships, internal versus external attributions, and the decision to administer punishment (Mitchell & Wood, 1980). Perhaps this methodology could also be used to determine whether good and poor leaders attend to different situational factors.

Third, it may be possible to use the results of low fidelity simulations as a part of an organizational policy training program. This methodology avoids many of the ethical concerns associated with the laboratory and field studies of immoral or unethical behavior, and designing a training program to fit with the results of the low fidelity simulation may give people the skills to deal with difficult moral dilemmas at work. Although the utility of these programs has yet to be determined, the potential savings associated with the reduced incidence of employee unethical behaviors may be substantial.

In conclusion, low fidelity simulations may be a useful methodology for investigating a number of organizational phenomena without subjecting individuals to actual policy infractions. This study demonstrated that situational variables can affect an observer's toleration of another's unethical behavior. Future research should examine the generalizability of this methodology to the study of other organization phenomenon.

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#### Authors' Note

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